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ABSTRACT

The Chicago EARLY Program identifies and provides remediation for prekindergarten-age children who are considered likely to have school learning problems later. Consisting of an assessment and a corresponding curriculum, the program is designed for any preschool teacher to use as part of his or her regular program. The EARLY materials were first implemented on a citywide basis in the Chicago public schools' prekindergarten classrooms in the 1979-80 school year among Title I ESEA Child-Parent Centers, Head Start Programs and other Title I ESEA Early Childhood Programs involving approximately 150 teachers. To facilitate the citywide implementation of the materials, inservice training was delivered in two half-day sessions. Subsequently, teachers were required to administer the EARLY Assessment to each 3- or 4-year-old child. Responses to program evaluation questionnaires suggest that the materials were perceived as useful and practical. Teachers found the assessment component easy to use and found the non-mandatory curriculum component helpful in delineating readiness skills expected of the prekindergarten child. The materials appeared to facilitate parent involvement. Of the teachers who responded to the evaluation questionnaire, 48% said they used the assessment results to individualize their program. (Additional findings of the evaluation are reported.) (Author/RH)

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Chicago EARLY Program: Initial Implementation of a Preventive Prekindergarten Program*

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Abstract

The goal of the Chicago EARLY Program is to identify and provide remediation for prekindergarten-age children who are likely to have later school learning problems. The program consists of an assessment and corresponding curriculum designed to help prekindergarten teachers achieve this goal as part of their regular program. The authors describe the initial implementation of EARLY throughout Chicago's 500 preschool classrooms, including a discussion of the use of the materials and aspects of inservice training. The teachers' response to using the materials was extremely favorable. The study illustrates that identification/remediation techniques can be easily incorporated into a wide variety of early childhood settings.

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Chicago EARLY Program: Initial Implementation of a Preventive Prekindergarten Program

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Objective

School achievement in Chicago, as in most large urban areas, is a chronic and pervasive problem. However, current research indicates that all children can learn when instruction is appropriate to their needs (Bloom, 1976). Furthermore, the earlier intervention is provided, the more likely children will be successful later in school (Lazar et al., 1977). The goal of the Chicago EARLY Program is to identify and provide remediation for children at a pre-kindergarten age who are likely to have later school learning problems. The program consists of a screening test and a corresponding curriculum designed to help preschool teachers achieve this goal as part of the regular program of early childhood education.

Target Population

The children targeted for the program are those three- and four-year-olds who are most likely to benefit maximally from remediation provided as part of the regular early childhood classroom. We characterize that type of child as one who has normal intelligence, but who demonstrates a large discrepancy between abilities in different skill

areas. Such a child is clearly more difficult to identify at an early age than a child with a more severe or obvious handicap, such as mental retardation, deafness, or a crippling disease. Children with more obvious exceptionalities are usually spotted by parents or pediatricians while the child is still quite young. Children with learning difficulties, on the other hand, are most often not identified until they are well into their school years (Naron, 1981), and have already experienced the feelings of frustration and inadequacy associated with failure.

Target Skills

Because our task is to identify and help pre-reading and pre-writing children who are likely to have difficulty learning those skills, we operationalized the skills at a preschool level by means of a simplified information-processing model (see Naron, 1977). This model analyzes the precursor skills to reading and writing in terms of two important components: input or how the child receives the information (auditorily or visually), and output or how the child responds to indicate understanding (by a verbal or by a motor response). This theoretical model provides a framework within which to identify a child's strengths and weaknesses as well as to develop appropriate remedial prescriptions.

Description of Materials*

Identification Component. The Chicago EARLY Assessment is a short, easily administered screening test (with

*The Chicago EARLY materials are available through Educational Teaching Aids (ETA), 159 West Kinzie Street, Chicago, Illinois 60610.

instructions available in both English and Spanish) that was carefully developed, field-tested, and validated over a period of several years with approximately 2,000 Chicago prekindergarteners. The 23 items on the assessment yield a score in each of five skills areas: Gross Motor, Fine Motor, Language, Visual Discrimination, and Memory. A detailed description of the development and validation has been reported earlier (Naron, 1977). The study included a check of concurrent validity which indicated a strong relationship between the results of the EARLY Assessment and the results of extensive diagnostic testing. More recently, a study has been conducted to determine the reliability and predictive validity of the instrument (Perlman, et al., 1981).

Remediation Component. The Chicago EARLY Instructional Activities for Ages 3-5 is an instructional guide based on sequential, developmental objectives in three skill areas: Body Image/Gross Motor, Perceptual-Motor (including arithmetic), and Language. The area of Body Image/Gross Motor incorporates both motor and language activities and is viewed as preliminary to both the Perceptual-Motor and Language curricula. The Perceptual-Motor activities assess fine motor and/or visual discrmination skills. They incorporate the content areas of color, shape, size, familiar objects, and arithmetic -- and proceed from basic discrimination (matching) skills to higher-level conceptual skills. The Language activities are aimed at increasing communication

skills, and emphasize both receptive language (i.e., comprehension) and expressive language (i.e., speaking). These activities proceed from basic auditory discrimination skills through simple sentence-building, to reasoning and interpretive thinking skills.

An experimental pilot program of the curriculum was conducted with a small sample of preschool-age children in Chicago (Naron et al., 1979). The children received remediation in either the Perceptual-Motor or the Language skill area, and all received remediation in the Body Image/Gross Motor area. Pre- and post-tests administered to these target children and to a comparison group indicated significant gains for the target children in both skill areas.

The Total Program. The Chicago EARLY Program (EARLY Assessment and Remediation LaboratorY) focuses on both identification and remediation, since both are essential ingredients for prevention of school learning problems. The program is designed for any preschool teacher to implement as part of his/her regular prekindergarten program. Two important considerations guided the development of the materials: practicality and flexibility. The per child cost of the materials is low, and the assessment is short enough to be given to each child at the beginning of the school year without undue burden on the teacher. The teacher then has immediate information about all the children in the classroom in order to group them according to their individual needs.

The instructional activities are coded to the assessment so that the teacher can find each child's ability level within each skill area and proceed with teaching from there. The activities are written so that the inexperienced teacher or aide can follow them verbatim while the experienced teacher can integrate them with his/her preferred methods of teaching.

Initial Implementation of the Materials

Reasons for Implementation. The Chicago EARLY materials were first implemented on a citywide basis in the Chicago public schools prekindergarten classrooms in the 1979-80 school year. The decision to do this was based on the use of the materials serving a variety of needs. Specifically, the administration of the EARLY Assessment could provide the Department of Research and Evaluation with required testing information while concurrently providing the early childhood teachers with information for educational planning. At no extra expense, the administration of the EARLY Assessment also could provide screening for a sizeable portion of the city's three-to-five-year olds in response to the Child Find mandate of P.L. 94-142. Furthermore, because the EARLY curriculum outlines comprehensive objectives for three- and four-year olds, the instructional program could be standardized across the different preschool settings in the Chicago public schools for the first time.

Implementation Sites. The early childhood programs in the Chicago public schools fall into three broad categories: Title I ESEA Child-Parent Centers, Head Start, and other Title I ESEA Early Childhood Programs (e.g., Home Visiting Team). A total of about 110 teachers have morning and afternoon classes in the 25 child-parent centers. The approximately 130 Head Start teachers teach a similar schedule, in individual classrooms located in neighborhood schools across the city. A total of about 15 teachers serve in the other Title I early childhood activities in Chicago, each teacher located at a different school.

Since most of the early childhood classrooms either are in a child-parent center (CPC) or are Head Start classrooms (HS), this discussion will focus mostly on these two programs. Because of several differences in the structure of the two programs, they provide an interesting contrast to each other and demonstrate the flexibility of the EARLY materials. The child-parent centers are self-contained buildings which each house from four to twelve prekindergarten classrooms. Both the age groups of three- and four-year olds are served. Every CPC is administratively tied to an elementary school and its principal, but the actual day-to-day running of the center is done by the head teacher at each center. The Head Start centers are individual classrooms located at different elementary schools around the city. Only four-year-olds are accepted into the program. The Head Start teachers are directly supervised by the principal in their school, and

are also provided services by a district Head Start coordinator. Unlike the child-parent center teacher who is surrounded by teachers of prekindergarteners, the Head Start teacher gets the opportunity to interact with other preschool teachers only at the regular district Head Start meetings.

Inservice Training. In order to effectively implement the EARLY materials citywide, we needed to provide inservice training to all the preschool teachers as well as the program administrators. Because of the large number of staff involved, a hierarchical model of staff development was chosen. The main author of the EARLY materials directly inserviced the head teachers of each of the 25 child-parent centers and the seven district coordinators of the Head Start program. They in turn inserviced the teachers for whom they were responsible. The number of teachers in the other Title I early childhood programs was small enough to be included in the top-level inservice. Auxiliary staff such as speech therapists and parent coordinators also received inservice training.

Staff development was delivered in two half-day sessions; one focused on the assessment and the other focused on the curriculum. A videotape illustrating the administration of the EARLY Assessment was an integral part of the first half-day session. Copies of this videotape were made available to the head teachers and district coordinators who requested it. The second half-day session related the assessment to the curriculum and included demonstrations of selected instructional activities to illustrate their flexibility.

Distribution of Materials and Procedures. At the time of the first inservice training session, every teacher was given an EARLY Assessment Kit and Manual, as well as the necessary scoring sheets. The teachers were required to administer the EARLY Assessment to each three- and four-year-old by October 31 of that school year. Although the assessment can be given by a trained aide or auxiliary staff member, the teachers were encouraged to administer the assessment themselves to as many of the children as possible. Guidelines were provided to help the teachers interpret the test results for educational planning and for referral purposes. At the time of the second inservice training session, an EARLY Instructional Activities book was given to each teacher with suggestions, but not mandates, for use. The teachers were also given various reporting forms to use on a trial basis.

Data Source

Questionnaires regarding all aspects of the implementation of the EARLY materials were sent to the preschool teachers, head teachers, and principals involved in the program. Of approximately 250 early childhood teachers, 176 returned questionnaires (107 from CPCs, 59 from HS, and 10 from the other early childhood programs). Twenty of the 25 head teachers responded, and 24 of 41 principals responded. The questionnaires covered the usefulness and appropriateness of the materials, the inservice training, parent involvement, reporting forms, and the methods by which the materials were

integrated into the regular program.

Description of Sample

Of the teachers who responded, 31 taught only three-year-olds, 85 taught only four-year-olds, and 51 taught three- and four-year-olds. Twenty of the teachers had non-English-speaking children in their classrooms, ranging from one to 42 such children per teacher. The vast majority of these teachers had an adult available in the classroom who could communicate in the children's home language.

Of the teachers who responded, 91 percent administered the assessment themselves. The other teachers had the assessment given to their students by auxiliary staff, central office staff, aides, and/or supervisory staff. Of the teachers who administered the assessment themselves, 27 percent also utilized the services of teacher aides, parent volunteers, and auxiliary staff to help them give the assessment.

Results

Assessment Component. The most common response concerning the assessment was that it is easy to use and helped the teacher "zero in" on each child's strengths and weaknesses. The following quotes are taken from different teachers' responses on the questionnaire and are representative of the reaction to the assessment:

> I think it's great! It's the first test that I have used that really tests things the children should know. I like the immediate feedback to the teacher as to norms. (From a CPC teacher)

> I feel the EARLY Assessment is a helpful tool in giving the teacher an idea where the child is, and in getting to know the individual child better. (From an HS teacher)
>
> The assessment is the best developed of all the types of tests/assessments for this age group that I have used during the seven years I have taught preschool. It is very beneficial in terms of identifying those children who need help in particular areas, especially the gross motor and fine motor areas which we don't get to that often at our center. (From a CPC teacher)
>
> The children generally enjoyed doing the test. One little girl (3½ years) said, 'That was delightful.' They liked being taken individually for the special attention. (From a CPC head teacher)

Of the teachers responding, 91 percent thought the assessment manual was adequate in explaining how to administer, score, and interpret the assessment. Eleven teachers found the percentile tables to be confusing, two thought the scoring of the "Recall Words" item confusing, one thought the scoring of gross motor too subjective, and three wanted norms tables for children over the age of five years. The two aspects of the manual found to be confusing have been rewritten for the next edition of the manual.

The teachers were asked to mention any assessment items which were either difficult to administer or used inappropriate materials. Of the eleven different suggestions which were made, seven were possible to address in the next edition of the assessment. The other four suggestions were mentioned by only one or two teachers and did not appear

to have much validity. Suggestions regarding the assessment score sheet were aimed at putting all items on one side of the paper; this modification has been subsequently made.

Remediation Component. The most common response regarding the curriculum was that it helped to delineate the skills expected for this age group. The following quotes are taken from different teachers' responses on the questionnaire and are representative of the reaction to the curriculum:

> ...it has given me many ideas and has enlightened my way of teaching young children the skills that most teachers take for granted. (From a CPC teacher)

> The program provided students with additional readiness skills which were highly beneficial. They are much better prepared to succeed in school. (From an Early Intervention teacher)

> ...gave me a good idea of what I should be teaching in Head Start. (From an HS teacher)

> I enjoyed teaching the activities because the children considered them fun and therefore were attentive and enjoyed participating in them. (From a CPC teacher)

Since use of the curriculum was not mandated, specific questions were geared toward determining the extent and type of use made of the instructional activities. Contrary to preliminary expectations that many of the teachers would prefer to use their traditional methods of instruction, only eight of the respondents did not use the EARLY curriculum at all. Overall, 24 percent of the teachers said they used several

EARLY activities each day, 19 percent of the teachers said they used about one activity per day, 28 percent said they used three or four activities a week, and 20 percent said they used only one or two EARLY activities per week. When the extent of curriculum use was compared by type of program, an interesting pattern emerged. Whereas 86 percent of the Head Start teachers used at least three or four EARLY activities a week, only 66 percent of the CPC teachers used the curriculum to that extent. This finding is consistent with the fact that the CPC teachers have many more resources available to them than the HS teachers, as described earlier in the section on implementation sites.

In terms of the conditions under which the EARLY curriculum was used, no consistent patterns emerged. Of the total respondents, 26 percent said they used the materials only when the whole class was broken into small groups, 17 percent said they used the activities only with individual target children who needed special instruction, and four percent of the teachers said they used the materials only with the entire class as one large group. The majority of the teachers used the materials in a variety of ways. Ten percent of the teachers said they used the curriculum with the class as a whole and for smaller groups, another 10 percent used the curriculum with small groups and with individual target children, and 19 percent reported using the curriculum under all three conditions. The only strong difference between the two early childhood programs in the type of use made of the curriculum was that 78 percent of the HS teachers reported using the curriculum with individual

target children while only 37 percent of the CPC teachers reported this as one of the conditions for use.

In terms of specific characteristics of the curriculum, 98 percent of the respondents said the curriculum format is clear and easily understood, and 95 percent said the objectives and activities were appropriate for the children in their classrooms. Equally high proportions of the teachers responded that the instructional activities meet the objectives and that none of the instructional procedures is difficult to follow. Although only 53 percent of the respondents reported using the activities in a sequential way, 91 out of the 92 teachers who answered this question said that the activities appear to be sequential/ developmental within each skill area. More HS teachers (62 percent) used the activities sequentially than did CPC teachers (27 percent).

With regard to the record forms used, the teachers generally found the classroom summary sheet useful, but 35 percent found a problem with the individual record form. Most of those who disliked the form found it to be too detailed, too much to keep up with, and not well defined. This form is currently in revision.

Inservice Training. All but five of the teachers who responded received some inservice training on the EARLY Assessment, while only 56 percent of the teachers who responded received some inservice training on the curriculum. Of the teachers who received no training on the curriculum, 83 percent felt confident using the materials without any inservice, but 17 percent did not feel confident.

The hierarchical method of staff development appeared to be quite effective. The teachers agreed that the inservice training was both adequate and useful. Many stressed the value of having seen the videotape illustrating the administration of the assessment as well as having practiced giving the assessment to each other before giving it to the children.

Parent Involvement. The materials appear to facilitate parent involvement. The assessment results are stated in terms of specific skills that the child has or has not mastered, and are therefore communicable to parents in a non-threatening way. The format of each instructional activity is simple and easily adaptable to home activities.

Of the teachers who responded, 83 percent discussed the results of the EARLY Assessment with the parents. The most common form of discussion with the parents was the individual parent conference, used by 59 percent of the teachers. Other forms of communication with the parents included speaking to the parents on an informal basis, telling the parents how to help at home, speaking only to the parents of the children with special problems, and speaking to the parents as a group.

A higher percentage of HS teachers (93 percent) discussed the assessment results with the parents than did the CPC teachers (76 percent). This may be partially attributable to the fact that the CPCs each have a parent coordinator, who may take much of the responsibility of communicating with the parents. Most of the HS teachers (77 percent) used the individual parent

conference as the means of communication, whereas only 45 percent of the CPC teachers used that method. Fifteen percent of the CPC teachers just spoke to the parents informally, while 14 percent spoke only to parents of children with special problems.

Use of the Assessment Results. Of the teachers who responded, 48 percent said they used the assessment results to aim instruction at each child's weak areas and needs, to individualize the program. Thirty percent of the respondents reported using the assessment results as a basis for grouping the children for instruction. No differences appeared between the CPC teachers and the HS teachers in their use of the assessment results.

The Overall Program. At the end of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked for any general comments about the EARLY Program. Of 79 teachers who responded to this question, 61 made genuinely positive remarks two made genuinely negative remarks (e.g., "too long, too boring"), and 16 made remarks concerning the appropriateness of the program for children first starting school. In this latter group, the CPC teachers with four-year-olds who had already been in the program for a year, found the materials to be less useful by the end of the child's second year in the program than for the three-year-olds and first-year four-year-olds. Similarly, the HS teachers who all had four-year-olds for the first time found the materials to be thoroughly appropriate.

Conclusions

Although no data are available on the cognitive growth of the children in the first year of citywide implementation of the Chicago EARLY Program (due to inconsistencies in the collection of pre- and post-test scores), the success of the program can still be ascertained in terms of the teachers' response to using the materials. Since the materials were developed as tools for teachers, and since teachers are not likely to use such tools if they are too complicated or require too much outside preparation (no matter how effective they may be in teaching skills), it is entirely appropriate to have the teachers evaluate the materials in terms of usefulness and practicality.

Overall, the set of Chicago EARLY materials seemed to help the teachers teach better; one Head Start teacher said the program "... helps us decide what our weaknesses and strengths are as well as those of the children." The most salient reason for the success of the EARLY materials is that they serve the needs of the teachers and are flexible enough to be used in a wide variety of settings. The different patterns of use of the materials between the CPC and the HS teachers illustrate how adaptable the materials are to different early childhood program structures. The materials require a minimum of inservice training, but at the same time they facilitate parent involvement, address the needs of the Spanish-speaking child, provide appropriate activities for both three- and

four-year-olds, and provide an accountability and management system acceptable to both the teachers and administrators.

The most significant and pragmatic evidence for the success of the initial implementation of the EARLY program is the unreserved consensus to continue to use the materials.

Educational Implications

The successful implementation of the Chicago EARLY Program illustrates that prekindergarten teachers can easily incorporate identification and remediation techniques into their regular instructional program. The benefits derived from catching and correcting learning problems before the children experience school failure are immeasurable to both the individual child and the school system as a whole. The findings have implications for not only the area of early childhood education, but also for special education and curriculum development.

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